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Colombia's Threats to Regional Security

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Colombia's complicated internal conflict is causing problems across international borders. Long-term government failures to provide a lawful environment have invited criminal activity that does not respect boundaries. How countries in the region respond to Colombia's plan to deal with the outlaws is an important factor. More important still is how Colombia addresses the conflict's center of gravity -- the FARC.

Colombia's Andean neighbors voice concern about the spillover of Colombia's conflict into their sovereign territories. What's more, ever since the United States announced its support to Plan Colombia, they cite the United States as progenitor of more problems to come. Colombia's troubles *are* having an impact on its neighbors, but the spillover from the US contribution to Plan Colombia is overstated.¹ The problems in the region are longstanding and are best understood today in terms of the growing power of the narcoguerrillas. Seeing that, Colombia's weaker neighbors would be understandably cautious in their statements regarding powerful outlaw organizations whose fortunes are on the rise.

Colombia has immense geostrategic importance to the United States and the rest of the world community. Uniquely located astride two oceans, its commerce continues to grow along north-south trade routes. It is three times the size of Montana and has various climates and growing zones that support a bountiful agricultural industry. The Andes Mountains are a compartmentalizing feature of Colombian life that have given rise to multiple urban centers, a historical federalist/anti-federalist argument and a corresponding lack of central government presence and influence in some outlying areas.

Historically, many of Colombia's remote regions have interacted more easily with trade centers outside Colombia, finding the lines of drift into other countries more useful than the cross-compartment routes within their own.² Reduced dependence on and allegiance to Bogota contribute to the overall lack of enthusiasm for central government programs in these areas, especially when they contain a punitive dimension. The US initiative under Plan Colombia centers on eradicating coca crops in the remote border department of Putamayo, across from Ecuador's Sucumbio province. This plan is under way, and large plantings of coca are being destroyed.

Backing up Colombia

Colombia has been a Cold War target for international communist expansion for obvious strategic reasons. Both the Soviet Union and Cuba supported insurgencies intended to spread communist influence throughout the region. One of the two main armed leftist guerrilla groups of the National Liberation Party (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*—ELN) was a direct product of Cuban socialist internationalism. The danger of global communism may have passed, but Colombia still faces the ELN and the much more powerful Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*—FARC), which the Soviet Union formerly supported. Both groups have devolved into big guerrilla business, chasing US narcotics dollars along with, or in competition against, other outlaw gangs. Together they spread narcotrafficking, gunrunning, kidnapping, extortion and other forms of pseudoinurgent terrorism throughout the region.

With those threats in mind, the United States pursues important interests in northern South America, including eradicating illicit drugs, strengthening democracy, and promoting political and economic progress and stability. The US government underscored these interests with a July 2000 supplemental aid package to assist Colombia. It added \$729.3 million for military and police assistance to existing programs for 2000 and 2001, plus \$311 million for economic and social assistance. The military aid portion will train three 900-man battalions to establish secure environments in which counterdrug police can operate. Other funding supports aircraft for the Colombian National Police, a joint intelligence center at Tres Esquinas military base on the Caquetá River and air-ground-river interdiction operations.³

This aid was intended to support a wider strategy under which President Andrés Pastrana sought \$7.5 billion in Colombian and foreign funding for security and nation assistance designated Plan Colombia. But now the term "Plan Colombia" seems to be used only in reference to the US aid package, especially the military portion focused on Putamayo.⁴

Former US President William J. Clinton officially identified all Colombia's bordering countries as illicit drug-producing countries, transit countries or both.⁵ Correspondingly, US supplemental funding also provides \$180 million to enhance regional drug-interdiction efforts in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Panama and Brazil.⁶ The drug trafficking is but one of a number of interrelated problems that Colombia shares with its neighbors. Insurgent terrorist activity, arms trafficking, money laundering and Colombians displaced from rural homesteads have concerned border countries. Colombia has long been a transit route for drugs and other contraband coming out of Peru, and Venezuela has long been a source and conduit for weapons going into Colombia.

The Cold War Ends: Colombia Drops Into the Rift

During the Cold War, the insurgency was the central national security issue. Cuba supported the ELN, and the Soviet Union supported the FARC. The Army's main effort was counterinsurgency, not counternarcotics. The guerrillas targeted Colombia's richest areas, where they could extort money from the leading producers of cattle, coffee, coal, emeralds, oil and bananas. International support, however, provided them war materiel, training and sanctuary.

When the Cold War ended, and along with it communist materiel support, many guerrillas abandoned communist ideology and turned to drugs as an important source of income. The narcoguerrilla nexus became the FARC's main financial pillar, earning it about \$500 million a year—more than half of their annual income—helping them infiltrate and weaken government institutions.⁷ Even Colombia's former President Ernesto Samper was caught in the web of narcocorruption when drug money was discovered to be a major source of his campaign financing.⁸

Private security forces and paramilitary organizations also appeared during the Cold War. Wealthy land owners, small communities and oil companies responded to the government's inability to provide basic security. They hired private security forces to protect people and property, and in time, the various paramilitaries grew and many combined. Today, the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC) is a major contending force led by outlaw Carlos Castaño.⁹ The AUC is involved in skimming earnings from the drug trade and continually violates human rights by intimidating peasants into not supporting the communist guerrillas.

More than 35,000 Colombians died during the 1990s as a result of the insurgency.¹⁰ Capital flight and emigration have reduced Colombia's ability to deal forthrightly with the crisis. Instead of taking to the field to lead the nation's youth against the rebellion, many of Colombia's elite have demurred or moved overseas. High school graduates are all but exempt from the fight. While guerrillas have grown to about 20,000 troops and the AUC to perhaps 7,000, Colombia's army of 121,000 is too small, strategically immobilized and ill-equipped to handle the threat decisively.¹¹

In July 1998, as both army and police units suffered battlefield losses to guerrillas, Pastrana flew to San Vicente del Caguán in Caquetá Department to powwow with FARC chief Manuel Marulanda Velez. Marulanda demanded that the government crack down on the paramilitaries and vacate government armed forces and police from 42,000 square kilometers (km) of key terrain in southern Colombia now called the *despeje* (clearance zone or zone of government withdrawal). Desperately wanting to arrive at a peace agreement, Pastrana agreed and withdrew government presence by November 1998. From a military perspective, this could create a strategic disadvantage for Colombia's armed forces; the FARC gained both sanctuary and positional advantage.

The *despeje* is essentially a special FARC sovereign zone that borders on the Sumapaz area to the north, a rugged mountain avenue of approach to Bogota peopled by pro-guerrilla communities.¹² The *despeje* also lies astride the drug crop areas, including Putumayo, helping to further encumber government access to the coca growing areas. The *despeje* lies at the upstream limits of riverine access into Colombia from Venezuela and Brazil, and it is a relatively short distance from the tricornered boundary of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. For all this, the guerrillas have conceded virtually nothing, even increasing the pace of kidnappings. The guerrillas have continually restated their goal of assuming power in Colombia and turning it into a socialist state—by force if necessary. The response of the Pastrana government so far has been to extend the *despeje* period repeatedly. At his February 2001 meeting with the FARC leader, Pastrana extended the *despeje*, which he now referred to as the FARC zone, another eight months. The Pastrana government also has sought ways to give the smaller ELN a *despeje* of its own northwest of Barracambermeja along the Magdalena River.



From their protosovereign country within a country, the guerrillas operate on interior lines to engage government forces in conventional combat, attempting to seize strategically key terrain. The *despeje* and adjacent areas to its south, including Putumayo, have become the center of the cocaine industry. Until the recent start of Plan Colombia, coca in this area grew unchecked by government control. Most of the world's coca is grown in Colombia, and more than 90 percent of the cocaine consumed in the United States is made in or transits this region.¹³

US supplemental aid supports a counterdrug campaign mainly in Putumayo Department. Eradicating coca in Putumayo would reduce drug industry income to the FARC, theoretically increasing its willingness to discuss peace terms with the government. The FARC is the center of gravity in Colombia's narcoinsurgent war, and drug production is an important FARC strength that can be attacked for leverage. In late 2000, fighting between FARC and AUC forces for control of Colombia's heaviest concentration of coca production in Putumayo seemed to favor the AUC. Deftly, Marulanda relaxed the confrontation between the government and the FARC and turned government energy more toward attacking the FARC's most effective enemy, the AUC.

For example, Colombian Attorney General Alfonso Gomez Mendez is seeking to prosecute the AUC leadership for kidnapping and murder, while Marulanda and Pastrana are forming a national commission to study the problem of AUC terrorism. Just after his meeting with Marulanda, Pastrana commented, "We prepared to disagree, but Marulanda is beginning to understand that it is a grand design for social revolution and that the military part of the plan is focused on drug eradication and on the need to fumigate coca fields . . . provided this was done in consultation with local farming communities."¹⁴ Or perhaps Marulanda realized that Plan Colombia spray planes were destroying coca fields that belonged to the AUC and not the FARC's fields safe inside the *despeje*.

Plan Colombia is not well-supported by other South American countries, who portray it as a threat to their own security rather than as an effective plan for attacking the underworld. Potential social impacts do exist, and neighbors would prefer to keep Colombia's problems inside Colombia. Besides, some South American and European countries prefer to deride Plan Colombia as a US creation—an interventionist policy offensive to sovereignty. The plan will not likely regain international adherence and enough foreign capital to significantly improve conditions inside Colombia.¹⁵

Colombia's Impact on its Neighbors

Most of Colombia's internal refugees are families displaced by fighting among the warring forces and attendant human rights violations. Except for citizens of "border cultures" who regularly cross border lines for work and family activities, Colombians mostly displace into poverty conditions around Colombia's larger cities—Bogota, Medellín, Cali and Barranquilla. Soacha barrio, outside Bogota, increased its population from 300,000 to more than one million in the past six years.¹⁶ In 1999 the Mayor of Cali, frustrated with the costs of supporting the *desplazados*, reportedly announced that he would install checkpoints along avenues of approach into the city to identify and turn them back.¹⁷

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates the number of internally displaced persons throughout Colombia ranges from 450,000 to 1.6 million. About 60 percent of the displaced people receive humanitarian aid, mostly from nongovernment organizations (NGOs). Although appropriate laws are in place, the Colombian government has been slow to help internally displaced citizens.¹⁸

Colombian emigration into neighboring countries—mostly Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama—does not match Colombia's internal displacement. Nevertheless, the outflow of Colombians into neighboring border areas is a matter of concern as governments anticipate that Plan Colombia operations will stir up additional refugee problems.¹⁹ Through the first weeks of February 2001, however, coca crop eradication in Putamayo did not produce an unmanageable wave of migration. Putamayo had never been a major source or receptor of migrants, and the overall population there is low.

In addition to migration, potential spillover effects include drug and arms trafficking, and guerrilla and paramilitary activity. At first glance, the effect of Colombia's conflict on each of its neighbors seems about equal, but the causes and responses vary from country to country. Each country contends with threats, and how they handle matters has made a difference. Brazil and Peru espouse a direct, no-nonsense response to threats and have fared better than Colombia for it. Ecuador and Panama seem to be dithering, subjecting themselves to border violations. Venezuela's direction is difficult to calculate, given its dynamic and mercurial leader, Hugo Chávez.

Venezuela: guerrillas, paramilitaries and refugees. Colombia's border with Venezuela is a dominion of FARC, ELN and paramilitary units that move across the border to attack one another, prey upon both countries' populations and seek advantage in the drug and arms trades. Colombia's border department of Norte de Santander is important as a major coca growing area

(an estimated 23,000 planted hectares) the FARC controls.²⁰ In recent years paramilitary forces have moved into the area to deny the sustaining population base to the FARC.

In practice, the FARC depends on the local work force to produce drug products and sustain its soldiers. The paramilitary forces know this and attack both guerrillas and civilians, driving refugees across the border. The Venezuelan government's concern about a huge refugee surge is evident in its lack of support to them. Occasionally there are incidents of turning back Colombian "displaced persons in transit" to their home country. The UNHCR says that it is Venezuelan policy to repatriate refugees, and its major goal is to reach an agreement on *nonrefoulement* (nonforced return) and the right to seek asylum.²¹

Colombian kidnapping rings add to the situation's complexity by capturing Venezuelan ranchers and selling them to guerrillas in Colombia.²² Neither Colombian nor Venezuelan forces can stop the lawlessness. The FARC and ELN have actively engaged in kidnapping and extorting ranchers and land owners on both sides of the Colombia-Venezuela border. The resultant landed class flight has harmed Venezuela's meat and milk industry, and allowed narcoguerrillas to move in. In 1997, Aristides Moncada Padilla, a "ranchers' cooperative" leader in one of Venezuela's border states opined that "Venezuela is in danger of losing its sovereignty" in the border area.²³ Now even Venezuelan government officials acknowledge that the situation is critical; Plan Colombia became a convenient name for their concerns. Chávez is critical of Plan Colombia, asserting that increased US support to military operations will lead to greater conflict among Colombian belligerent forces, thus causing increased problems in Venezuela.

The Colombia-Venezuela border has long supported a border culture in which both nationalities have moved freely across border lines, but as the Colombian paramilitary, guerrilla and military forces joust to position themselves for peace talks, the resulting uproar has encouraged increased emigration from Colombia to towns inside Venezuela. For example, Machiques, a Venezuelan city of 100,000, is roughly 80-percent Colombian.²⁴ In June 1999 3,500 Colombians crossed into Venezuela after a paramilitary rampage against presumed FARC sympathizers.²⁵ Venezuela views every such surge by unwanted foreigners as a threat to its sovereignty.

After a group of 30 Colombians crossed into Venezuela on 24 October 2000, Foreign Minister Jose Vicente Rangel—recently appointed defense minister—asked the Colombian government to improve border security and blamed Plan Colombia for increasing violence at the border.²⁶ The presence of an estimated 1.5 million Colombians in Venezuela support Rangel's professed concerns. Although Venezuelan border policy seems to play into the hands of Colombian narcoguerrillas by driving workers back to their farms, considerable drug production has moved into Venezuela. The US Office of National Drug Control Policy considers it a secondary source-country; more than 100 metric tons of cocaine leave Venezuela for the United States and Europe annually.²⁷ Much of the coca grown in the *despeje* also passes through Venezuela. The FARC's 16th Front ships products to European and US markets via Guaviare River basin in Colombia and the Orinoco River in Venezuela.²⁸

Venezuela is also noted for the huge amount of contraband that transits the country, especially guns. Throughout Colombia's history of internal war, Venezuela has been a constant, if not always reliable, pipeline for arms and other contraband. In describing counter guerrilla operations

in northern Colombia, a Colombian army colonel claimed that "50 percent of the arms we captured had Venezuelan army markings."²⁹

Brazil: defending the frontier against FARC incursions. Venezuela shares with Brazil these same kinds of spillover problems. Less concerned about refugees, Brazil pays attention to drug and arms trafficking and occasional FARC incursions. Brazilians have reason to be concerned about Colombia's internal problems. Colombian insurgents and narcotraffickers have been active in Brazil's border regions for many years. Threats to Brazilian interests include smuggling contraband ranging from guns to exotic animals; direct assaults against the environment and economy from illegal loggers, gold miners, fishermen and hunters; and Colombian insurgent and drug-trafficking activities. These threats have troubled the Brazilian government for more than a decade as shown by a number of well-reported events.

In 1991 a 40-man FARC guerrilla unit attacked an army jungle operations detachment inside Brazil along the Traíra River. Three soldiers were killed and nine were wounded.³⁰ The attack was repulsed when Brazilian special forces counterattacked into Colombia to kill seven guerrillas and recover Brazilian weapons and ammunition.³¹ In September 1996 the Brazilian army went on full alert because of reports that FARC elements had crossed the border into Brazil near Tabatinga, about 400 km south of the Traíra River incident. About 1,000 soldiers deployed throughout Tabatinga to guard border locations, military installations and the airport.³²

On 1 November 1998, across from the Dog's Head (*Cabeça do Cachorro*) region of Brazil's Amazonas state, 1,400 FARC combatants attacked to seize Mitú, the provincial capital of Colombia's Vaupes Department. Mitú serves as a transshipment point for chemicals essential in making cocaine. The contraband chemicals move up the Vaupes River from Brazil to production areas in Colombia.³³ To drive the FARC out of Mitú, 500 Colombian army paratroopers landed at the Querari, Brazil, airstrip (close to the border about 75 km east of Mitú) and attacked westward into their own country, regaining Mitú on 4 November. In the battle, 150 Colombian combatants, seven civilians and five FARC guerrillas were reported killed, and the FARC took 40 to 45 police prisoner.³⁴



Some of the 528 policemen and soldiers held captive by Colombian guerrillas. The pictures were published in the 14 August 2000 edition of Colombia's *Semana* newsweekly.

Again in 1999 Brazilian intelligence identified the army's airfield at Querari as a FARC target. It was thought that the FARC intended to deny Colombian armed forces' use of the strip during a guerrilla follow-on attack against Mitú. Pre-empting the FARC in late October, a 249-man Brazilian special forces unit spearheaded a major offensive to secure the Querari airfield and reinforce the Dog's Head area with 5,000 men of the Amazon Military Command. They deployed along the border from Sao Joaquim to Vila Bittencourt on a 600-km front to deter any attack.

Guerrilla use of narcotrafficking to sustain the Colombian insurgency reinforces the threat to Brazil. Its vast forested areas in Amazonas state, laced with the world's greatest river network and adjacent to other drug-producing countries, have made Brazil a major transit country for drugs bound for the United States and Europe. Brazil is a key supplier of chemicals needed to make cocaine. The river system is ideal for shipping large quantities of kerosene, sulfuric acid, potassium permanganate and acetone needed to produce the white cocaine hydrochloride crystals. The chemical trade is facilitated at Manaus' free trade zone where 256 companies import chemicals used to make drugs. Legitimately imported chemicals are repackaged for shipment to illicit drug labs in Colombia, Peru and Ecuador.³⁵

An investigation last year by the Brazilian Parliamentary Investigative Commission (CPI) revealed that large Brazilian narcotrafficking groups are selling weapons to the FARC via the Brazilian-Colombian border, using river corridors. The Colombian National Police have reported intercepting such "imports" as AK-47s, HK.91 (G3s), A-3s, ArmaLite-15s, Dragunov sniper rifles, Galil rifles, .50-caliber machine guns, 40mm grenade launchers and C-90 grenades, although not necessarily all from Brazil. There are continuing unofficial reports that the FARC has added man-portable, ground-to-air missiles, such as SA-14s and SA-16s from Russia and US Redeye and Stinger missiles from Syria, to its war chest.³⁶ The CPI also detailed the involvement of 827 Brazilian officials, such as legislators, magistrates, ministers, bank presidents and policemen, involved in Brazil's drug and arms trades.³⁷

This concern for narcoguerrilla trade at the Brazilian border caused Brazil to strengthen its border with Colombia under Operation *Cobra*. The scant 20-man Amazonas federal police force has been increased to 180 law enforcement officers, and equipment includes 18 patrol boats, two airplanes and a helicopter.³⁸ Seven federal police bases are now established along the border to inspect for contraband moving along rivers and roads.

This increased government presence in Brazil's border region developed slowly. Its historical dimensions go back to founding Fort San Francisco at Tabatinga in 1776 and, more recently, the 1985 Calha Norte Project for security and development along the jungle border line. Today Brazil keeps about 22,000 troops stationed near the border, and any additional buildup will be "to defend and safeguard our frontier" but not to fight alongside the Colombians, according to Foreign Minister Luiz Felipe Lampreia.³⁹

The current forward stationing of troops coincides with the long-awaited \$1.4-billion System for the Vigilance of the Amazon (SIVAM). The SIVAM is an integrated system of 10 giant radars (radomes), 100 weather stations, surveillance aircraft, communications monitoring and digitized satellite imagery supported by a satellite-based radio and telephone network. This year the United States is providing \$3.5 million to Brazil for the SIVAM project, plus some small boats for counterdrug riverine operations. The SIVAM concept is to protect against weather hazards, jungle fires and criminal activities and to control the Amazon airspace.⁴⁰ SIVAM security requirements include monitoring drug traffic, mineral and hard wood smuggling, demarcation lines, Indian reservations, national borders, forest fires and river navigation. SIVAM is the infrastructure for the wider concept of a Brazilian interagency System for the Protection of the Amazon (SIPAM).

Some years ago Brazilian security officials in Manaus and Tabatinga believed the surge of trans-national crime, guerrilla terrorism and lawlessness on their border was the result of successful drug interdiction operations in Bolivia and Peru. Despite historical trends that show these as long-standing security issues, Plan Colombia is cited now as an additional factor in Brazil's increasing border problems. Brazil's tough, no-nonsense attitude toward the narcoguerrillas is echoed by Peru's stand against guerrilla forces. After dispatching two guerrilla threats, Peru is now attending to its northern border with Colombia.

Peru attacks the problem. Most of the 1,000-mile border between Colombia and Peru runs east-west through an area of dense jungle along the Putumayo River—Colombia's Amazonas Department to the north and Peru's Loreto Department to the south. A Colombian panhandle at the eastern end of the border turns sharply south, reaching the town of Leticia, which faces the Brazilian town of Tabatinga. Loreto's capital at Iquitos is 90 miles south of the frontier. The vast strip of jungle between the Putumayo and Peru's Napo River has historically been of interest to Indians and oil explorers, but in recent years reports have surfaced that the FARC has been operating coca-production camps in the area. This area is so remote that it does not significantly affect FARC military operations, gunrunning or narcotrafficking, compared with other border areas. The population is too thin there to sustain guerrillas or present a noticeable refugee problem should fighting flare up.

Peruvian officials claim that there have been no clashes between Peruvian troops and guerrillas in the northern border area, although FARC activities have been detected there for years. Peruvian Defense Minister Walter Ledesma has stated that there is "total tranquility on the border"; nevertheless, the government reinforced the border area in February 2000.⁴¹

Indeed it may be correct to say that there has been no direct spillover effect along this border line — that is, if the unchallenged FARC presence is ignored. Nevertheless, the Colombian conflict spawned an incident involving FARC arms trafficking that was serious enough to bring down President Alberto Fujimori's government last year. Peruvian National Intelligence Service Chief Vladimiro Monte-sinos Torres was implicated in an international arms-trafficking operation that apparently delivered 10,000 assault rifles to the FARC. The resulting furor and political maneuvers eventually left Monte-sinos and Fujimori out of power and out of the country.

In that gunrunning event, East German rifles passed through Jordan, crossed the border into Colombia and were delivered directly to the FARC using Russian-built IL-76 cargo aircraft flown by Russians and Ukrainians.⁴² After a failed initial flight in March 1998, the second flight left Amman, Jordan, on 23 March 1999. More than 2,500 rifles were parachuted in wooden crates near Barranco Mina along the Guaviare River about 250 miles east of the FARC's *zona de despeje*.

The FARC's 16th Front coordinated the weapon-smuggling operation, received the weapons, established caches and distributed the rifles. In April the Colombian army conducted a counterinsurgency operation in which 16th Front commander Esteban González was killed and four Venezuelans were captured. Soon after, the Colombian army captured more than 100 rifles, and the serial numbers revealed their origins.⁴³

Three more flights were made through August 1999 using a flight itinerary of Amman; Mauritania; Trinidad and Tobago; and Iquitos, Peru. Each flight airdropped 2,500 rifles to the FARC. Peruvian narcotics police agents eventually grounded the aircraft. Reportedly, Jordanians were to provide 40,000 more rifles when the deal ended abruptly.

The Peruvians can be expected to handle any major Colombian guerrilla incursion, but the limited guerrilla activity the country does face is located in central and southern Peru, not on the border with Colombia. Peru's insurgent organizations, the Shining Path—*Sendero Luminoso* (SL)—and Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) have been defeated strategically, with only small remnants now trying to continue operations. The SL occasionally interrupts free movement of persons by setting up roadblocks in sections of the Upper Huallaga Valley and attempts to recruit new people.⁴⁴

Police, intelligence and military authorities have been effective in decisively attacking these groups and bringing leaders to trial. The last key SL leaders were arrested in 1999, but there are occasionally reports of countryside skirmishes as SL bands attack government targets. The MRTA has been dormant since its defeat at the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima in 1997. The Peruvian judicial system deals harshly with terrorists and narcotraffickers.⁴⁵

Peru's counterdrug strategy of alternative development and eradication seems to be on track, reducing coca cultivation 66 percent over the past four years. The Peruvians will continue their counter-narcotics efforts without much interference from the Colombian conflict spillover and will emphasize strengthening air and river interdiction and beefing up the alternative development program because of increasing coca prices.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, cocaine labs are generally located in the far eastern reaches of Peru where aircraft can depart before the Peruvian air force can catch them. Colombia no longer plays a major role in transshipping drugs from Peru. Most Peruvian routes move drugs by river and air through Brazil, over land through Ecuador and across the ocean via Callao port near Lima.



Clandestine airstrips in Peru are usually located in the far eastern areas, where aircraft can depart before the Peruvian air force can catch them. Here, the airstrip at Campanilla is being blocked and dismantled by Peruvian National Police. (right) Aircraft at another airstrip await their next load of illicit cargo.

An economic recession and increase in coca prices have encouraged Peruvian farmers to reconsider growing coca, thus increasing pressure on Peru's alternative development program of 700 community and farm organizations. The program involves rehabilitating coffee and cacao plantations; producing banana, pineapple and palm heart; building roads and bridges; strengthening local governments; and providing credit assistance for farm families.

Peru's relatively small refugee population of 700 is peopled more by Cubans, former Yugoslavs and Iranians than by Colombians. Peru has been resolving its internally displaced person problem effectively. About 430,000 Peruvians fled their rural Andean homes, mainly to the cities, during Peru's violent insurgency in the 1980s and early 1990s. Nongovernment organizations suggest that the conflict has affected as many as 1.6 million people, but today about 70,000 Peruvians remain internally displaced.⁴⁷ In contrast, Peru's neighbor Ecuador expressed particular concern that Colombia's counter-drug sweep across Putumayo province would generate a refugee flow into Ecuador. A month into eradication operations, however, Plan Colombia had not produced the predicted wave of migrants. More perturbing perhaps to the residents of some towns in Ecuador's Sucumbíos province is the loss of income from the FARC, which frequented Sucumbíos as a logistics area and sanctuary.

Ecuador and local accommodation. A military setback to Colombian rebels could move permanent or semipermanent guerrilla encampments over the border into Ecuador. Their

presence would require a response from Ecuadorian military that is not prepared to confront experienced, desperate guerrilla units. A perceived inability to handle the guerrillas could conceivably unhinge the Quito government. Meanwhile, border Ecuadorians who not only live peaceably with the guerrillas but who also make their living trading with them cannot be expected to support a Colombian plan to undermine guerrilla financial strength. The Ecuadorian border city of Lago Agrio is an established rest and relaxation center for oil workers, guerrilla soldiers and paramilitary troops. Soldiers and coca plantation workers from both sides of the border come to Lago Agrio for dental and medical care.

In cooperation with the UNHCR, the Catholic Church in Lago Agrio registers and assists refugees. It reports that about 100 refugees appear each week, adding to the roughly 2,500 refugees it now helps. The US Committee for Refugees says the Church assisted nearly 1,500 Colombians last year, helping them obtain documents to prevent their involuntary return to Colombia. It estimates that about 30,000 Colombian refugees were living in Ecuador at the end of 1999.⁴⁸

Officials in Sucumbíos have planned for an influx of 5,000 refugees, but as long as the FARC *despeje* provides one available sanctuary, Sucumbíos is unlikely to receive a much greater population influx, even as it loses FARC-generated income. If there is insufficient progress with the peace process, and the *despeje* is finally retaken by the Colombian state, then Sucumbíos may be in for a greater spillover problem.

Any difficulties Ecuador has on Colombia's border might be manageable if the country were in good shape otherwise, but it has been led by five presidents in as many years and has a fractious legislature. The country is experiencing rural migration to cities and emigration of capable citizens overseas. Indigenous tribes are asserting themselves, encouraged by the FARC guerrillas. Foreign debt consumes about 40 percent of the national budget, and there is little funding left to address problems of acute poverty.⁴⁹ Ecuador has a popular military force, particularly in rural areas. The army is a source of stability, holding sway over matters of internal politics, but it may not be able to control the Colombian border. It is increasing its strength in Sucumbíos to about 1,500 men in five border posts and is reinforced by another 1,500 soldiers.⁵⁰

Plan Colombia signals an increase in Colombian armed forces' operating tempo in Putumayo Department, which may increase refugee crossings into northern Ecuador. However, the Colombian government has not caused the most recent increase in migration. The AUC moved into Putumayo in strength in 1999 to contend with the FARC for control of coca harvests there. The AUC made incursions into Sucumbíos to catch FARC guerrillas on leave in Ecuador and to attack the FARC logistics apparatus. Recent reports suggest the presence of a FARC sister organization called the FARE (Ecuadorean Revolutionary Armed Forces), but there has been no significant operational group presence.

Fighting among Colombian army units, para-militaries and the FARC in Putumayo throughout 2000 inflated Ecuador's border economy. As the FARC closed down access to Putumayo, preventing food and other supplies from entering the region, prices on the Ecuadorian side of the border roughly doubled.⁵¹ In Sucumbíos' capital city, Nueva Loja, an important FARC weapon-smuggling node, overall business sagged by 70 percent, perhaps because of AUC presence. With

the Nueva Loja medical association treating four or five wounded guerrillas each week, medical business continues apace. According to Doctor Edgar Reynoso, the public hospital "gets 10 to 15 at a time" when there is combat in Putumayo.⁵²

The Ecuadorian army estimates that about 60 percent of residents in towns nearest the border are sympathetic to the FARC, although support diminishes as one moves farther from the border. The mayor of Lago Agrio and several others in the border area are reportedly leftist politicians who are sympathetic to the FARC. Battles, roadblocks and kidnappings have slowed down oil business in the border region. In January 2001 the military found a FARC base camp in Ecuador, adding to concerns that the FARC was moving in. Just three months earlier the government had assailed the FARC for kidnapping 10 foreign oil workers from Ecuador's border area.⁵³

Despite Ecuador's difficult political, economic and security issues, it has maintained the strategic offensive in addressing Colombian spillover. Ecuador agreed to a 10-year arrangement with the United States to allow a forward operating location at Manta, Ecuador, from which military surveillance aircraft could operate to detect drug-trafficking flights in the region. This operation might help contend with the fact that Ecuador's location is ideal for transshipping illicit drugs, essential chemicals, arms and other supplies needed for drug production—and combat.

The Ecuadorian government has also implemented a supportive asylum policy and has been working with the UNHCR to address refugee issues on the border. As in Venezuela, refugees fleeing Colombia try to remain anonymous to avoid further persecution by the guerrillas and paramilitary forces. It is difficult to bring them into a formal refugee program in border areas where security cannot be assured.⁵⁴ Ecuadorians may be concerned that more lawless activity will move to northern Ecuador as Plan Colombia unfolds. However, drug production, arms trafficking, guerrilla camps and criminal gangs were already evident. Though relatively free of drug production, Panama's border with Colombia shares many of these problems.

Panama's vulnerable frontier. Panama's most contentious national security issue is controlling its border areas. Panama has not had a military since 1989, and it was subsequently abolished by its constitution. Consequently, Panama could not effectively perform counterinsurgency, counterterrorism and counterdrug missions. The Border Police Service now has more than 2,000 personnel stationed throughout the Darien province bordering Colombia, but it is not organized and trained to stand up to Colombian warriors.⁵⁵ The country would benefit if Colombia's government would increase its control of the lawless situation on that side of the border and perhaps from regional assistance. President Mireya Moscoso continues to seek help.

The Panamanian Public Forces have been unable to deal with foreign armed groups. Colombian AUC chief Carlos Castaño said, "we have declared as military targets all members of the Panamanian National Police who are working in open collusion with the FARC along the border."⁵⁶ Panamanians in the remote, easternmost San Blas and Darien provinces represent only 2 percent of the population and daily fear being harassed and brutalized by Colombian paramilitary forces, guerrillas and criminals.

Paramilitary and FARC incidents have been especially prevalent along the border with Colombia since the mid-1990s. Even Colombian army units have crossed the border into Panama to pursue

the FARC.⁵⁷ FARC fronts send elements into Panama's territory for resupply and R&R and to prepare for further combat in Colombia. Paramilitary groups harass Panamanians who support the FARC. Panamanian officials rationalize that the guerrilla presence in the Darien area does not threaten its free trade zone or canal operations.

The view of the border seems less threatening from Panama City.⁵⁸ One incident, however, made it difficult for the government to ignore. At La Miel, a small village on the north coast, several hundred heavily armed troops of the FARC's 57th Front moved in and directly threatened the Kuna Yala Indian communities of La Miel, Armila and Puerto Obaldia. Then AUC paramilitary forces were spotted in the area. After FARC guerrillas appeared in their village, 120 Panamanians fled La Miel for safer provinces, concerned that AUC paramilitaries would move into the area and kill villagers thought to be supporting the guerrillas.⁵⁹

Refugees crossing the border from Colombia into Darien represent another problem for Panama because they are interlinked to border conflict and incursions carried out by the guerrillas and para-militaries. The growing number of Colombians crossing the border to safety in Darien has gained international attention. The US Committee for Refugees reported in 1997 that Panama had forcibly returned 90 Colombian asylum seekers. This energized the UNHCR to negotiate with Panama to establish minimal rules of conduct for processing refugees. Rules included adhering to the principle of *nonrefoulement* and temporary refugee security. Panama cannot protect its own citizens in remote border areas from incursions by irregular armed groups into Darien, so protecting refugees is problematic.⁶⁰

The appearance of Colombian refugees places heavy demands on Panama's resources. When FARC guerrillas of several fronts overran the Pacific port city of Jurado, nearly 500 Colombians fled 65 km along the southern coast to Jaque, Panama. Fortunately, several humanitarian organizations provided refugee assistance, and by March 2000 about 100 Colombians had been returned to their homes in Jurado.⁶¹ The situation is similar on Panama's northern coast in westernmost San Blas province. Conflict in Colombia's Gulf of Urabá region has driven refugees west, toward Puerto Obaldia.

Panama's National Organization for Refugee Attention (ONPAR) identified 600 Colombian asylum seekers in Panama at the end of 1998. An estimated 580 Colombians fleeing violence in their home areas sought refuge in Panama's Darien province in 1999, including about 30 in March and more than 550 in December. An additional 7,000 Colombians live in Panama as legal migrants through the 1994 Migratory Regularization Act.⁶² Panama is improving its treatment of Colombian refugees, and it now allows the UNHCR access to new arrivals in coordination with ONPAR.

Arms shipments typically travel along Costa Rica's northern coast to Panamanian border ports like Almirante and Bocas del Toro, then along Panama's Caribbean coast to Colon or adjacent Coco Solo. Contraband—AK-47s, hand grenades and explosives—proceeds via border towns like Puerto Obaldia on Panama's Caribbean coast through the Gulf of Urabá and is sold to Colombian insurgents and drug traffickers.⁶³ When Colombian navy units increase their presence in the Gulf of Urabá, the gunrunning shifts to Pacific Ocean routes.

Panama typically positions patrol boats from its National Maritime Service at border ports on the north and south sides of the isthmus to stop the gun and drug trafficking. However, Panama's small "coast guard" cannot protect the San Blas and Darien littorals from pirate raids against fishermen, and it is ineffective at controlling gunrunning and Colombian guerrilla incursions.

Panama has many of the same, long-standing border problems as its neighbors in the Andean region. It cannot do much about the FARC and paramilitary activity because it lacks combat power. Fortunately, these problems are in an outlying province and, hopefully, can be held at arm's length—the apparent strategy for dealing with the spillover.

Attacking the Center of Gravity

Narcotrafficking, gunrunning and other lawless activities have affected all border areas for many years. Colombia's warring forces move freely into Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama, but in Brazil, the FARC has paid dearly for its incursions. All countries are affected to some degree by refugee problems, but the issue seems manageable, except in Venezuela where there is little accommodation among Colombia, Venezuela and the international organizations. None of these security challenges attacks core national survival interests, but they present political issues and funding requirements.

Colombia's neighbors suggest that the counterdrug campaign in Putumayo will encourage refugees, coca farmers and armed contestants to move across frontiers, especially into Ecuador. The supplemental aid package supporting this campaign provides \$20 million to Ecuador, \$32 million to Peru and \$3.5 million to Brazil to help address these concerns.⁶⁴

There is some justification for regional leaders' fears about Colombia and US assistance to Colombia. The current conflict, now drug-propelled, has been raging on and off for more than 30 years. The FARC has become a huge narcobusiness, with little apparent incentive for ending the war. Whatever the political reasoning for President Pastrana's ceding so much land to the FARC, the military consequence is daunting. The FARC zone—the *despeje*—is a huge base for military operations, recruiting, drug cultivation and arms smuggling, as well as its stated purpose—discussions with the government. With every passing week, the *despeje* sanctuary makes it less and less likely that the Colombian army will be able to build the kind of force correlation necessary to defeat the guerrilla.

Until now the AUC, also an outlaw organization, was successfully reducing the strength of the FARC and ELN. It appears, however, that President Pastrana has acceded to the FARC commander's demand that the government focus on eliminating the AUC. Colombia's neighbors may perceive that the Colombian government is not embarked on a course to defeat the guerrillas or keep them from gaining or sharing power. Colombia's neighbors may not be inclined to expend diplomatic capital on efforts to oppose a rebel movement that continues to gain position vis-à-vis the Colombian government.

The Peruvian experience with the SL and MRTA provides valuable insight into effectively deciding the center of gravity and having the will to attack it. As stated in National Defense University's *Strategic Assessment 1999*, "Once its [Peru's] insurgency was defeated, the state was

able to mount a more effective national campaign against drug trafficking organizations, and US assistance had a more substantial impact."⁶⁵ The Colombian government is emphasizing counterdrug operations at a stage of insurgency in which the FARC appears well able to conduct conventional military operations. The army finds itself fighting in three directions—the guerrillas, paramilitaries and narcotraffickers. As security specialist Michael Radu has observed, "the primary problems in Colombia are FARC and ELN, and . . . no solution to the drug problem is possible while the insurgents operate at will."⁶⁶

The FARC and ELN have been able to build a modicum of rural support at gunpoint, but the Colombian army and National Police are the second-most-respected institutions in Colombia behind the Catholic Church.⁶⁷ If the army maintains its human rights discipline and gains full support of the civilian political leadership, it could be fully capable of attacking the center of gravity.

Colombia's neighbors have a big role to play through providing the international support to contain FARC, ELN and paramilitary activities. Their troops are not required to deploy alongside Colombian soldiers, but they are needed in some strength in their border regions. Brazil has been especially effective in denying the FARC a sanctuary for military operations against Colombia. With supportive international involvement and decisive leadership at home, Colombia has a good chance of eliminating the dangers that cause spillover.

Brazilian National Security Minister General Alberto Cardoso provides a view of Colombia's security initiatives. "If there is one positive aspect to the emergence of these problems with Plan Colombia, it is that all society has now awakened to the necessity of the defense of the Amazon."⁶⁸ But Brazil's actions and comments are derived from a position of relative power and invulnerability. Colombia's other neighbors are less confident and appear to sense flagging morale in Colombia's body politic.

Colombia's military—as apolitical as any in Latin America—may have that tradition tested in the months ahead. Analogous temptations have not always been resisted in the region. Potential imperatives include a leftist guerrilla on the verge of strategic success, the loss of sovereign territory, a faltering economy and a Colombian public wanting a tougher stand against the various outlaw organizations. Article 217 of the Colombian constitution states, "The Armed Forces will have as a fundamental purpose defense of the sovereignty, independence, and integrity of the national territory and the constitutional order."⁶⁹ Article 217 may gain weight in the minds of more and more Colombian officers, while those parts of the constitution intended to keep the Colombian military under civilian political control may begin to lose their grip. Any decisive move by the Colombian military to arrogate political power likely would weaken prospects for regional security coordination, at least in the near term. On the other hand, if the Colombian government hardens its stance against the narcoguerrillas, then combat correlations inside Colombia could change dramatically in favor of the Colombian army, military disaffection would dissipate, and real support for a combined anti-outlaw plan from Colombia's neighbors could develop.

1. Plan Colombia is President Andrés Pastrana's multifaceted nation-assistance strategy.
2. See William L. Scruggs, *The Colombian and Venezuelan Republics* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1910). This century-old volume reflects the close relationships of northern Colombian outlying provinces with Venezuela.
3. The Center for International Policy provides a laydown of US aid to Colombia, <www.ciponline.org/>.
4. President Pastrana's broader strategy is dismissed. This was certainly underscored on 1 February 2001 when the European Parliament of the European Union voted 474 to 1 against supporting Plan Colombia. Only a week had passed since President Pastrana had traveled to Paris to request \$700 million to support the economic and social development aspects of his peace plan. The Europeans responded with advice on the peace process, land reform and the "risk of sparking off an escalation of the conflict in the region." The European Parliament opted to align itself against US interests. See "EU Parliament Slaps Down Plan Colombia," *Agence France Presse*, 1 February 2001, www.prairienet.org/clm.
5. "Major Illicit Drug-Producing and Transit Countries," US Embassy Bogota, 26 January 2001, US State Department, www.embaixadaamericana.org.br/drugs.htm. "The Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961, as amended, requires the President to annually submit to Congress a list of those countries determined to be major illicit drug-producing or drug-transit countries. The FAA requires that half of most US Government foreign assistance to any country on the Majors List be withheld until the President determines whether the country should be 'certified.'"
6. Barry R. McCaffrey, "Remarks on Regional Implications of Plan Colombia," US Embassy Bogota, 26 January 2001, US State Department, www.embaixadaamericana.org.br/colombia.html. In 1999 more than 22,957 Colombians died of drug-related deaths according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy.
7. Exact figures are not available, but it is commonly accepted that the FARC alone makes this much at least. See Rafael Pardo, "Colombia's Two-Front War," *Foreign Affairs* (July-August 2000), <http://www.prairienet.org/clm>, accessed 4 July 2000.
8. An exhaustive study in Spanish indicates the guerrillas' financial power may be greater than suggested here. See Jesus El La Rotta. M., *Las Finanzas de la Subversion Colombiana: Una forma de explotar la nación*, (Bogota: INCISE, January 1996).
9. AUC member groups are the Peasant Self-Defense Group of Córdoba and Urabá (ACCU), Eastern Plains Self-Defense Group, Cesar Self-Defense Group, Middle Magdalena Self-Defense Group, Santander and Southern Cesar Self-Defense Group, Casanare Self-Defense Group and the Cundinamarca Self-Defense Group. "United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC)," *Periscope*, CIP online at <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/infocombat.htm#Paramil>, accessed 8 January 2001.
10. This is a commonly used number, but the death toll could be far greater.

11. Guerrilla strengths vary by source. The FARC is about 15,000 to 17,000; ELN about 5,000; AUC about 5,000 to 7,000. The credible Latin American News Syndicate in its *Latin American Weekly Report*, 18 May 2000, www.latam-news.com, puts the FARC strength at 11,850.
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13. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict Brian E. Sheridan, "Statement for the Record," Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Committee on International Relations, US House of Representatives, Washington, DC, 21 September 2000.
14. Arnaud de Borchgrave, "Colombia's President Predicts Cease-Fire by Term's End," *United Press International (UPI)*, 10 February 2001; Jose Ramos, "Colombian Government, Rebels Gear Up for Continued Peace Talks," *Agence France Presse*, 13 February 2001, <http://www.prairienet.org/clm>, accessed 13 February 2001.
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